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431107

Thursday, July 2, 1992

Ledger-Sentinel

# Opinion

*Editorial staff opinion*

## Open meetings law for government, too

An episode at last week's Oswegoland Park District board meeting illustrated that defending the Illinois Open Meetings Act should not be confined to citizen activists or representatives of the press.

During the meeting, a representative of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), a U.S. Governmental agency, who was making an oral presentation to the board noted that her remarks were being taped by the park board. Upon noticing the tape recorder, she interrupted her presentation and demanded the taping be stopped and that the tape be erased. An employee of the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) who was accompanying the federal employee then demanded that park district director Bert Gray hand over the tape, which he did.

Taping public meetings is routine for most reporters these days, and it's becoming routine for most governmental agencies, too. It's much easier to write the minutes of a meeting if a taped record of comments made at the meeting exists.

Such taping is not only routine, however, it is protected under the Illinois Open Meetings Act, which states that "any person" may electronically record or even film an open meeting of a public body in Illinois.

Both the federal employee who demanded the taping be stopped and the state employee who seized the park district's tape were acting outside Illinois law. To its credit, the IDPH stated their employee was not acting in accord with department rules at Thursday's meeting, and they further promised to counsel him concerning the Open Meetings Act.

Meanwhile, the federal employee said that Thursday was the first time she had been taped at a public meeting since beginning her job in 1983, and that she made remarks without knowing the provisions of the Open Meetings Act. She said she will investigate the meaning of the law in Illinois.

We think both the IDPH and the ATSDR owe the Oswegoland Park District Board of Commissioners a letter of apology for the actions of their employees. Further, we think both employees should be thoroughly briefed on Illinois law concerning open meetings.

It's cause enough for concern when a local governmental body objects to having an open public meeting taped by the public or a reporter. It is even more troubling, however, when state and federal employees feel it within their power to brow-beat local governmental bodies into surrendering up their rights already granted to them under state law.